

# THE KIDS NEED SHOES

How do you turn bees into shoes? Last year's Joan Wakelin Bursary winner, Eleri Griffiths, went to Africa to find out. Here, she tells us how she got on



Administered by The Society in partnership with *The Guardian*, the Joan Wakelin Bursary Offers £2000 for the production of a photographic essay on an overseas social documentary issue. It remembers Lancashire-born photojournalist, Fenton Medallist Joan Wakelin HonFRPS, who died in 2003 at the age of 75, leaving behind an impressive body of work.

Last year's winner, Eleri Griffiths, tells us that her journey to undertaking her winning project, *The Kids Need Shoes*, began with her decision to take up beekeeping.

Having recently moved to a rural area of North Wales, and with a history of photographing projects on environmental issues, Eleri got in touch with Alan Morley of the Conwy Beekeepers' Association.

A retired honey farmer and volunteer with British charitable organisation Bees for Development, with over 50 years of apiary experience, Alan has educated beekeepers as far afield as South America, India, and Africa.

Possessing a natural empathy with bees, Alan prefers a holistic and organic approach, embracing simple methods and a 'low key' attitude, as opposed to the complex methods of hive management used by most honey producers in industrialised countries today.

Among Alan's many stories, it was one in particular, resonating as it did with a vision of hope and prosperity, that captured Eleri's imagination.

In the town of Bamenda, North West Cameroon, is the Village Women Organisation for Sustainable Development Cameroon. A beekeepers' cooperative, it was established in 1997 by Marianna Tanda Fumsi, who became interested in beekeeping when she volunteered in a honey shop.

While there, Marianna enrolled on a beekeeping course run by Alan, where she gained practical knowledge, and soon became an independent beekeeper, establishing hives on her family's smallholding in

the rural community of Bambui, on the outskirts of Bamenda.

With a passion for women's issues, Marianna recognised the potential for training women to keep bees as a means of generating income. Through the sale of honey, and related products, such as wax for candles and furniture polish, women are able to provide food and purchase seeds for the ongoing harvests, pay for medical treatment and, most importantly, pay for their children's education.

As in many African countries, children in Cameroon are forbidden from attending school unless they have the correct uniform and proper shoes. Parents must pay school fees for each child, but with some 40% of the population living below the poverty line, many find it extremely hard to provide for even the most basic needs.

With this degree of deprivation, children have little or no hope of accessing education, which ultimately can make all the



**Far left** Honey bees cover a top bar hive while it is being inspected. Smoke is used to control the bees as they cluster to protect the hive.

**Left** Bridget Mbah and Josephine Musongong, members of the Bamendankwe Women's Beekeeping cooperative, work together to extract honey.

**Below** St Francis Roman Catholic School, Bamibli, N W Province Cameroon.



difference to their future development, as well as that of their families and the wider community.

Almost 17 years after its inception, the beekeeping cooperative is fully certified, with endorsement from the Cameroon

government. It offers training, as well as supporting women and youth through community development programmes, advising widows, and providing education on environmental issues and natural resource management.

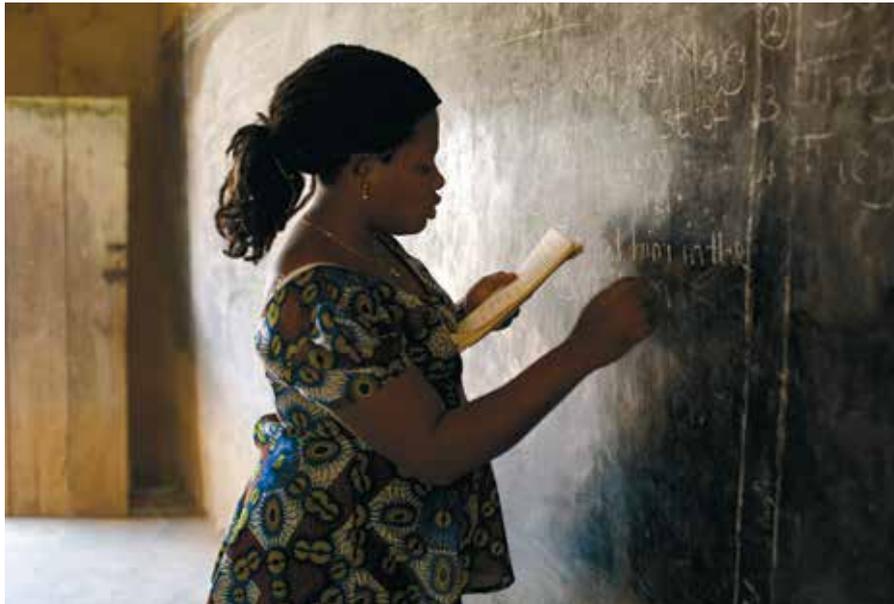
Networking between grassroots organisations meanwhile means there are now several similar women's beekeeping cooperatives in the North West Region of Cameroon, including those in the towns of Belo, Fundong and Bamendankwe.

## THE JOAN WAKELIN BURSARY

**Right** St Francis Roman Catholic School, Bambili, N W Province, Cameroon. During the dry season, the shutters are kept closed to keep out the heat and dust. With no electricity, classrooms are dark, making it hard for pupils to work.

**Below right** Beeswax from a recent honey harvest is melted on an open fire. A useful saleable by-product, it can be used to make candles and polish.

**Far right** Honco Honey Cooperative, Bamenda, an organisation run by Caroline Ngum. Caroline received training from Alan Morley, who has trained beekeepers all over the world while volunteering for the British organisation, Bees for Development.



Although Marianna's role within the organisation she founded has shifted from training to administration, she frequently returns to the family smallholding in Bambui, to nurture a small colony of bees, and regularly attends hive meetings with the women of a village high in the hills above Bamenda.

"The women of these beekeeping cooperatives have long recognised the need to support each other and work together, to enrich their lives and live in harmony with nature", says Eleri.

"Having previously photographed poor, but resilient, communities in South Africa and Romania, I wanted to investigate this environmentally friendly and inspiring project."

Establishing contact with Marianna through Alan. Eleri corresponded with her via email to discuss the possibility of visiting, to work with her and the beekeeper community, and to document the gathering of honey, and the positive impact that honey production has on the lives of the

women and their families.

Prior to her trip, Eleri deliberated over what to shoot on – Hasselblad or Rollei, film or digital, and so on. In the end, based on some trail runs photographing bees with the Conwy Beekeepers' Association, she concluded that photographing while wearing a beekeeping suit is not easy, so decided on taking as simple a kit as possible.

In addition to a protective bee suit therefore, she took with her a Canon EOS 5D MkII, with L series 50mm f/1.2 and 35mm f/1.4 lenses, a Metz flash and an Apple laptop, all packed into a fairly discreet backpack.

"As I was taught while on the Documentary Photography course at Newport University, I wanted to stick to my brief, while remaining flexible to the opportunities that would present themselves", she says. "Beekeeping was of course my priority, along with visits to schools to see the facilities and environment that they provided.

"Then, once I met the women beekeepers, and heard of their experiences and

difficulties, I began to understand their issues and needs more comprehensively, and I hope this is reflected in the images.

"Beekeeping provides a much needed additional income for these families, enabling funding for such essentials as vaccines for babies and young children.

"I planned my visit to coincide with Cameroon's mild dry autumn season, in February and March, as this is when the honey harvest takes place.

"The area is peaceful and fertile. This, combined with a good climate, means the bees here can produce an extraordinary crop – up to 15 litres of honey for each harvest, as many as four times a year. With changing seasonal forage including pollen from the flowers of plants such as eucalyptus, coco yam and palm, each season's honey tastes different.

"However, perhaps the most unexpected thing during my visit was the unseasonal weather. The rainy season here begins in March – the 15th, to be precise, according



to one local – but for me it arrived early.

“Rain, accompanied by thunder, would fall late in the afternoon, which is typically when beekeepers head out to their hives, as bees are less aggressive later in the day, and less likely to attack. We were forced to cancel three beekeeping sessions due to heavy showers.

“These early rains indicate a change in climate, which is recognisable particularly by the beekeepers, who are adapting to behavioral changes in their hives.

“There has been increasing concern for the honeybee in recent years internationally, as climate change, pesticides, and other factors weaken their population.

“For these beekeepers, as in other countries, there has been a noticeable drop in the honeybee population. Once, the sight of dark swarms migrating from overpopulated hives in order to establish new colonies was common. Now, it is rare.

“Bees are sensitive to climate, and there is no doubt that, even in this fertile

country, changes in the environment are affecting their behaviour. According to the local women beekeepers, the seasons for harvesting have changed, and are an indication that the world is changing, too. As pollinators, bees are vital to our ecosystem, and their decline has serious and far-reaching consequences.”

Funding from the bursary helped to pay for Eleri’s air travel to Bamenda and accommodation during her visit, post production costs, insurance, and equipment.

“This was my second attempt at applying for the Joan Wakelin Bursary”, she says. “I was shortlisted in 2012. One of the best things about this bursary is that there are virtually no restrictions: anyone can apply, regardless of training, age or background.

“Apart from the financial benefit of gaining funding, the prestige of winning a bursary from the RPS in conjunction with *The Guardian* was a key reason for my reapplying.”

**David Land**

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## JOAN WAKELIN BURSARY 2014

- Deadline Monday 16 June
- Submit a written proposal outlining your photo essay subject on an overseas documentary issue, in a maximum of 500 words, along with 8-12 images, measuring 30cm in the longest dimension, at 72ppi, evidencing your approach to the medium, and your photographic ability
- Entry is free and open to all, of any age or nationality
- Shortlisted candidates must be available for interview at *The Guardian*'s offices during the last two weeks in July
- For details of how to apply, go to: [www.rps.org/learning/project-funding/joan-wakelin](http://www.rps.org/learning/project-funding/joan-wakelin)